



Equity Case Studies

Torquay Academy: Red Flags Review

Torquay Academy: Red Flags Review

Using data on barriers to prioritise pupil needs.



At a glance

Phase: Secondary (11–18)

Context: Large coastal school in Torbay (c.1440 pupils), part of Torquay Boys' Grammar School MAT

Equity focus: Improving homework completion, attendance and engagement for 11–15-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds facing multiple barriers to learning

Key strategy: Combining “red flag” data with structured relational support

Who led it: Deputy Heads of Year (DHOYs), supported by SLT and subject TLR holders

What changed: Clearer priorities, more consistent parental contact, improved targeting of staff time



The challenge we were trying to solve

Torquay Academy serves a community with high and overlapping levels of disadvantage. Around one third of pupils are eligible for the Pupil Premium, 11 per cent have identified SEND, and significant numbers are young carers, children in need, or have English as an additional language.

Despite sustained effort, gaps persisted. Progress 8 outcomes for pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium were lower than for their peers. Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to achieve a grade 4 or above in English, maths and science GCSEs, had lower attendance and homework completion, weaker parental engagement, and were over-represented among pupils who became “NEET”.

Leaders recognised that the issue was not a lack of effort, but that support was being spread too thinly. Without a clearer way of prioritising need, staff time and energy were being diluted.



What we did

The school introduced a structured, data-informed prioritisation model, designed to identify the most significant barriers facing pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and respond consistently.

Each year group from Year 7 to Year 10 was allocated a Deputy Head of Year (DHOY) with explicit responsibility for pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium. The starting point was a ranking exercise: DHOYs identified the biggest barriers affecting disadvantaged pupils in their year group.

Across the school, three barriers emerged repeatedly:

- Literacy, particularly low reading ages on entry
- Parental engagement, including difficulties supporting homework at home
- Self-efficacy, reflected in low confidence, avoidance and poor help-seeking

These priorities shaped the strategy for the first implementation cycle.

DHOYs then worked with focus groups of 10-15 pupils. Support followed a consistent weekly structure:

- Reading three times a week, using targeted adult support and structured reading activities
- One weekly session focused on PSHE and student wellbeing, with an emphasis on confidence and motivation
- Weekly phone calls home to parents or carers, focused on encouragement, routines and shared problem-solving rather than compliance

Alongside this, staff used a set of agreed “red flags” to prompt professional discussion, including: postcode reading age on entry; KS2 SATs scores; summer birth; primary school attended; gender.

These indicators were used to prioritise attention, not to label pupils.

Target pupils and strategies were reviewed regularly, with pupils moving on or off the focus list as circumstances changed.



Why this mattered for equity

Rather than treating disadvantage as a single category, the approach recognised that need is uneven, dynamic and contextual. Data was used not to diagnose deficits, but to ask sharper questions: who needs what, right now?

This allowed the school to shift from reactive interventions to early, targeted relational support, particularly for pupils whose difficulties might otherwise remain invisible.



What made it work

Clarity of purpose. The focus was deliberately narrow: improving homework completion and engagement, rather than attempting to address every barrier simultaneously.

Relational consistency. Weekly contact with pupils and families helped build trust and reduced the sense of school as distant or punitive.

Professional judgement. Data informed decisions, but staff were encouraged to challenge rankings and bring contextual knowledge to discussions.

Whole-school buy-in. Closing the Gap (CtG) sheets and the red flags approach were introduced through twilight sessions that focused explicitly on relationships. In advance, teachers prepared short slides to welcome new classes, while pupils completed “getting to know you” questionnaires mirroring staff prompts.

At the first twilight, staff focused on 25 pupils per year group who were eligible for the Pupil Premium and, in Key Stage 3, had lower reading ages or scaled scores on entry. Teachers pooled knowledge about these pupils’ aspirations, family contexts and interests, enabling more informed conversations and stronger relationships from the outset.

Clear governance. Subject TLR holders in English, maths and science were linked to the goal of achieving a grade 4 for all pupils, with fortnightly one-to-one meetings to monitor progress and adapt support.



Barriers and challenges

- Staff concern about workload
- Variability in the quality of internal data
- Anxiety about labelling pupils

These were addressed through repetition, clear messaging, and emphasising that the model was about prioritisation, not judgement.



What changed

Staff reported clearer priorities when working with pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, more consistent communication with families, and greater confidence in knowing where to focus limited time and resources.

Crucially, internal conversations shifted from “Who qualifies?” to “Who needs support most, and how do we know?”



Project sustainability

The work is embedded within existing leadership roles, routines and accountability structures. By aligning data review, staff meetings and line management with a clear equity focus, the approach can be maintained and refined over time using existing capacity.



How impact was measured

Impact was monitored using multiple indicators:

- Movement on effort boards (covering homework, attendance, behaviour and mindset)
- Improvements in reading ages for pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium
- Homework completion rates
- Attendance for disadvantaged pupils
- Progress 8 outcomes and grade 4+ attainment in English, maths and science

These measures were reviewed cycle by cycle and used to refine targeting.



What we'd do differently/advice to others

Start with a small number of priorities; depth matters more than breadth.

Treat data as a prompt for professional dialogue, not a verdict.

Build structured time for relationships into the model.

Review regularly and expect priorities to change.